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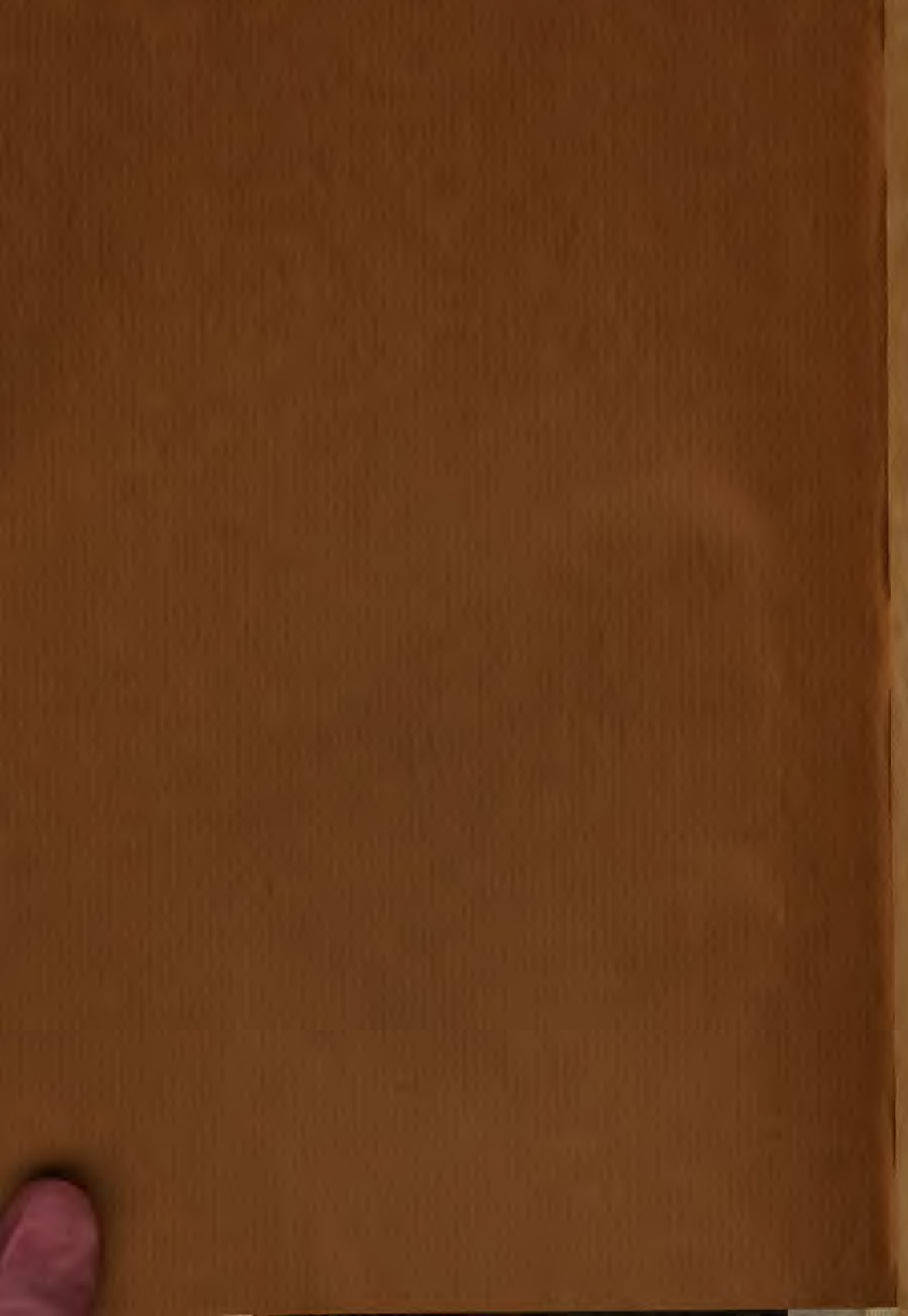
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The Real Partner  
of  
"Tennessee's Partner"

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WILLIAM DALLAM ARMES

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# The Real Partner

OF

## "Tennessee's Partner"

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WILLIAM DALLAM ARMES

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# The Real Partner of "Tennessee's Partner"

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By WILLIAM DALLAM ARMES

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In his lecture on the Pioneers, Bret Harte asserted that in his stories of early Californian life he had narrated only what had actually happened; that with a single exception they were founded on facts. Be this as it may, inasmuch as it was not his primary purpose merely to give an accurate picture of that life, he would naturally, as a literary artist, select, color, and magnify the facts it furnished him that he might accomplish what evidently was his primary purpose, the effective telling of a romantic, dramatic, humorous, or pathetic story. We have *a priori* reasons for believing that in no case were the facts given to his readers precisely as they were received by him.

But in one instance we do not have to rely on *a priori* reasoning. In the Bret Harte Memorial number, September, 1902, of the "Overland Monthly," Mr. Frederick M. Stocking re-tells a story that he told Harte some thirty-five years before and that gave Harte the basis of fact for one of his most successful stories, "Tennessee's Partner." The chief incident in this, the one that evidently set Harte's imagination a-working, is that in '55 a miner in the course of an earnest plea to prevent a lynching drew forth a bag of gold and said that he would give his pile rather than have it happen. This is absolutely all that the two stories have in common. In Mr. Stocking's story the man who was in danger had confessed assaulting the little daughter of an old miner; he was a newcomer in the camp and a stranger to the man who made the plea; the plea was not that his life might be spared but that he should be turned over to the authorities and the camp saved from the disgrace of a lynching; and the plea was successful. Practically everything in Harte's story, then, that makes it the little masterpiece that it is is the product of his imagination. He transfigured the tame and somewhat commonplace material. As Mr. Stocking expresses it, "The genius of Bret Harte is shown in the creation of the individual 'Tennessee,' and only his genius and knowledge could have interwoven his ideal into the story of the old miner."

There was not even a hint in Mr. Stocking's story that J. A. Chaffee, the miner who made the impressive plea, had a partner to whom he was more than usually attached. Such was, however, the case. A young wheelwright of Worcester, Mass., he was standing on the railroad plat-



from there one day in the latter part of 1848 when he was accosted by a stranger of about his own age, one J. P. Chamberlain, a carpenter, who was on his way to New York to arrange for passage to California. At once there sprang up between the two young men a friendship similar to that which Montaigne celebrated as having existed between Etienne de la Boece and himself; and when a little later Chamberlain started on the long voyage around the Horn to a virtually unknown land Chaffee was his companion. The partnership thus begun lasted for fifty-five years, till Chamberlain died in 1903, but eight weeks before Chaffee.

Long before his death Chaffee was locally famous as "the original of Tennessee's Partner," and naturally, but carelessly, strangers sometimes identified *his* partner, Chamberlain, with Tennessee. This afforded Chaffee much amusement, but was resented by Chamberlain, who was a quiet, law-abiding citizen and a thoroughly estimable man.

Their long life of hard work—mining, working at their trades, and ranching—did not bring the partners a competence, and they died in comparative poverty. Their last days were made more comfortable by the bounty of Professor Walter A. Magee, of the University of California; and to him Chaffee bequeathed the little that they had been able to accumulate, principally a small ranch near Second Garrote, or Groveland. Among their miscellaneous goods and chattels was a small folio blank book in which Chamberlain had Sunday after Sunday recorded their experiences from the time they left home until the end of 1866, when, all the pages being filled, he wrote: "And now I will have to say good-bye to this old Book that has been my companion for the last eighteen years. Although monotonous in the extreme, it is sometimes a pleasure to look back over its pages. Then again, to look back and see the changes that have taken place in our old ship's company in their different wanderings in California almost makes one feel sad."

Having been given to me by my good friend Professor Magee, this old book is now one of my most highly prized treasures. Again and again have I turned over its blue pages and deciphered the faded writing, and ever have I derived from it new pleasure. The entries are, as Chamberlain says, monotonous, for, spite of what "perverse romanticists," to borrow Mr. Chesterton's expression, have written, the life of the miners in general was monotonous; but to me at least they are full of interest. Just why I should care to read that on one day Chamberlain picked up a lump of gold worth \$42.50, that on another after cutting down an oak they got but \$1.20 from washing out the dirt around its roots, and that on still another it was snowing too hard for them to work, it is not easy for me to say. 'What's Hecuba to me or I to Hecuba?' Perhaps the solution of the problem is to be found in what Sauerteig wrote on "the worth that lies in reality"; for here too "a little row of naphtha lamps, with its line of naphtha-light, burns clear and holy through the dead night of the past: they who are gone are still here; though hidden they are revealed, though dead they yet speak."

As those to whom I have shown the journal have found in it the same

interest that I have, I venture to hope that these extracts from it—the first ever published—will appeal to a larger circle of readers.

For a while after their arrival, Chamberlain and Chaffee remained in San Francisco; but then they "got the mining fever," and went by way of Stockton to the Mokelumne River. They were fairly successful here, but decided to return to "the city." At Stockton, however, they heard that San Jose had been made the capital of the State, and concluded to turn aside and try their fortune there. They readily secured work as carpenters at \$12.00 a day apiece, more than they had been able to make at mining; and, as there was a great demand for houses, decided to put up one as a speculation. They bought a lot for \$1000.00, had the frame-work of a two-story house shipped from San Francisco, and when not otherwise employed worked at putting it up and enclosing it. But "the Legislature of a thousand drinks" moved the capital to Benicia; the boom in San Jose was at an end; and people left it "like rats leaving a sinking ship." Chamberlain and Chaffee therefore nailed up the doors and windows of their unfinished house, and, with four friends, started for the mines afoot "to recuperate." They were "flat broke," the combined capital of the six when they reached Swett's Bar on the Tuolumne River being but fifty cents. A kindly storekeeper gave them credit for "grub & tools," however, and they set to work. They did fairly well, but were lured by tales of richer diggings to Chinese Camp, eight miles further on, and thence to Second Garrote, some twenty miles to the southeast. On Friday, August 29, 1851, they passed through First Garrote, "named in honor of a Mexican that was hung for stealing," and reached the place that, little as they guessed it, was thenceforth, for over half a century, to be their home. Chamberlain, who had a keen eye for the beauties of nature, was much impressed by the place, which, he says, was "named by James Shoto [Chateau?], a St. Louis Frenchman. He had no cause to [give] such a horrid name to this beautiful valley, as no one had ever been hung here, & Garrote is a Spanish word, to strangle." As if he had a premonition that the place was to mean much to him, he gives a more than usually elaborate description of it in his journal: "Garrote No. 2 is located in a basin surrounded on all sides by high mountains except a small pass where the creek finds its way out to the Tuolumne. The valley contains some 300 acres of very good land for farming, which is claimed as such by the enterprising settler, but cannot interfere with the miner. The valley is covered with very large Oaks, which form a delightful shade. The surrounding hills, which would be called Mountains in some countries, are densely covered with lofty Pines, Fir, and Cedar Trees. On the whole, the landscape scenery is to a lover of Nature beautiful, but whether gold is as plenty as we want remains to be seen."

Here they found an old log cabin, which they fitted up for winter quarters, and then they started mining. At Chinese Camp this had been comparatively easy, for there was more or less gold in all the dirt; but here it was much more laborious and less satisfactory, for "the gold is near the Bed Rock & in some places 10 or 12 feet of worthless dirt has to be thrown off." Time and again they dug down to bed rock only to secure

little or nothing for their hard labor. There was, moreover, a scarcity of water, so that they were unable to use the toms that Chaffee had built. The entries for the close of 1851 and the beginning of 1852 follow. Save in the matter of punctuation, I have made no change in transcribing them: "the Vandyke looks best in its antique frame."

"Garrote.

"The week Ending Dec. 14, 1851.

"We have had beautiful weather the past week for any other business but mining & would be good for that if we had a plenty of water.

"Mining is the most perplexing business I ever followed; it keeps one in a state of anxiety all the time. When we are doing nothing at all, we are anxious to make something; and when we are doing well, we are anxious to do better. If we could see what was hidden under the earth, then we could dig to some advantage; but such an arrangement would be contrary to the edict, 'by the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread all the days of thy life.' Perhaps I do wrong by wishing that I could see where some rich deposit of gold was concealed so that I could get what I wanted in a short time; but I cannot help so wishing, for I am getting tired of the life a Miner has to live.

"The week Ending Dec. 21st.

"The week has passed off without rain, consequently without any material change in our affairs. It commenced drizzling last night, and bids fair to continue a day or two. Hope we will not be disappointed.

"Monday, 22. We did not work owing to the inclement weather.

"Tuesday, 23. The long looked for has at length come, for today the rain has fell in torrents, and we have been in the house watching it with much pleasure.

"Wednesday, 24. Rained hard all day, but we could stay in the house no longer. We washed out \$40.

"Thursday, 25. Christmas day, and everything overflowed. Toms, Cradles, Bucketts, and a general assortment of miners' tools are moving down stream. Miners are busy in the morning securing their property, after which they adjourn to the grocery and there spend the day playing cards, drinking whiskey, &c, &c, &c.

"Friday, 26. We worked and got \$32.

"Saturday, 27. Rained to hard to work. Thus ends our first week of using a Tom in Garrote No. 2.

"Sunday, 28. The ground was covered with snow this morning, but it all left us before night.

"Monday, 29. Washed out \$32.50.

"Tuesday, 30. Weather very inclement. Only got \$16.

"Wednesday, 31. Weather fine, and after consultation 'twas thought best to divide our force, as there was not water enough for us all on our ravine. Chaffee & I accordingly started prospecting for another ravine. We found one some 3 miles distant that prospected 10 cts. to the pan.

Swain & Cates washed out \$15.00. Thus ends the year 1851.

"Thursday, Jan. 1st, 1852.

"Chaffee & I commence the New year by packing tent & tools over to the ravine we prospected yesterday, and select a very romantic spot to pitch our tent, there not being a tent or shanty within 3 miles of us. Spent the day in putting up our tent and building a chimney. On arriving at Garrote at night, I find a letter from Sister, which is a first-rate New Year's gift.

"Saturday, 3. We have finished our house, and this day we have had a hard day's work moving our traps for mining. We had to make 3 trips over one of the hills of California, which if we had not been loaded we should probably [have] passed by without noting the beautiful scenery around us; but, as such was not the case, it was very agreeable to stop often and rest our wearied limbs, and in so doing we had a chance of viewing the surrounding country, which amply repays the lover of Nature for the toil one is subject to in climbing the hills of California. The day itself has been one that poets like to write about, being cloudless as the noonday sun and still and calm as a mirrored lake; and to make it more pleasant the forest birds are pouring forth their mellow notes, of which Robin Red breast takes a prominent part, which, by the way, is the sweetest of them all to me: it reminds me of my own New England home. From the summit of this Mound we have a fine view of the Majestic Sierra, with their snow-capped peaks pointing to the heavens above, while to the west we have a view of the less pretending hills of the coast Range, enveloped in fog, but by the sun's powerful rays has the appearance of a thin gauze spread over them."

The weather continued fine; there was not enough water to work a ton; with a cradle they could make barely enough to "pay board," and so, after four weeks by themselves in this ravine, they moved back to Garrote, "for we can make expenses anywhere, and 'tis more agreeable living among society than alone."

The greater part of the year they spent in mining around Garrote and in the ravine with varying success. But it mattered not how bad the luck Chamberlain's entries are always cheerful. During the week ending May 16th they took out \$36.00, and Chamberlain comments, "Such is the fate of Gold hunters, and to me 'tis nothing new to make poor wages at mining. I have been here so long and a good portion of the time just paying expenses that now I don't mind much about poor wages." In July they decided to "go below for a week or so for the purpose of recreation and to get something to eat besides pork and beans." In San Francisco they attended church on the plaza and in the streets, and, having met one of their shipmates, were taken by him out to the Mission and given the best dinner the Barnum Hotel could provide. They spent a few days visiting friends in San Jose, but early in August were back in Garrote and glad to be there: "These old pine-covered hills look good to us," Chamberlain wrote. In October he was surprised to meet George M. Pratt, "an old acquaintance

from the states," who decided to become a partner with them, paying \$150.00 for a third interest in their claim. The rains set in exceptionally early this year, before the merchants had laid in their winter stocks, so that the prices of provisions soared skyward. Flour, for instance, was 35 cents a pound, and not a sack to be had at that. The rain, however, enabled them to wash out the dirt that they had so laboriously thrown out and piled up during the dry season. They hired labor at \$5.00 a day, began working—and for the week ending Dec. 12th had but \$137.00 for their pains. Pratt must have regretted his \$150.00! Snow and rain prevented their working much during the following week; and then come the final entries for 1852.

"Garrote.

"The week Ending Dec. 26, 1852.

"The past week has been stormy except Monday. Tuesday snow commenced falling and every day since has been more or less of it. Although it has been stormy, disagreeable weather, we have worked most of the time; but have not taken but 64\$. Yesterday, Christmas, we did not work, and spent our time variously. Pratt shouldered an old muskett and went over the hill to kill a deer; but got nothing for his pains, except a hard day's jaunt through snow 3 feet deep. He thinks hunting is not what 'tis cracked up to be. Chaffee has spent his time prospecting, and has made 3\$ 50 cts. As for myself, I have spent the day at a Chicken shoot and have enjoyed the sport first rate, the distance being 100 yards, the price 50 cts. a shot.

"The Week Ending Dec. 31.

"Monday. Commenced bright & early with two Toms, one on the creek, the other in a small ravine. Myself and another took the ravine & had 27\$. Chaffee, Pratt, & another had the Jeny Lind Tom on the creek & only got \$8.

"Tuesday. Rainy. Sluiced off top dirt on the Creek in the forenoon.

"Wednesday. Rained like blazes. Sluiced off Top dirt in the forenoon; afternoon set by the fire.

"Thursday. Chaffee, Pratt, & four others sluiced off a large tract of ground. Rowland & I worked in the ravine. Had 40\$.

"Friday. Rained all day. Washed a short time in the morning; had 7.00. Evening we burnt powder in various ways to make a noise in honor of the New Year. Old musketts were loaded to the muzzle & fired; logs were charged with powder & rent asunder; in fact, everything that could make a noise was brought into requisition and kept almost incessantly at it till the short hours of 1853.

"Jan. 1st, 1853.

"We commence the New Year runing 2 Toms all day with 4 men besides ourselves. We only had 38\$ at night."

During the spring they worked away at mining with indifferent success. Jan. 16th, Chamberlain wrote, "It takes nearly all we can earn to pay for Grub. Yesterday we bought 100 lbs. of flour & paid 60\$, which is some

1852  
pumpkins!" The entry for Jan. 24th notes: "Commenced this morning bright & early on some ground that 5 of us had worked 2 days in clearing off. We washed nearly all day and give it up in perfect disgust, for on looking at the raffle Box there was something less than 1 dollar. We discharged the hands we had employed and thought we would try and find ground that would pay beter before we employed more help." Provisions became scarcer and scarcer till on Feb. 9th he wrote: "Afternoon I went over to the other Garrote to get something to eat, as there is nothing here." But ill luck did not blind him to the beauties of Nature; on April 10th he entered: "Spring is here now with all its beauty; flowers of every hue are scattered promiscuously about and birds are warbling forth their songs of praise." On May 8th he wrote that they had about made up their minds to remain in Garrote during the summer, and so "we thought we [would] prepare to live a little more like folks and Monday we bought 2 cows; paid 250\$." The latter part of May they felt quite encouraged: the entry for May 22d states: "The past week we have done very well, and think we will soon find the rich Spot we have been looking for so long. We have worked 5 days and have taken 367\$. Wednesday Pratt picked up a piece weighing 3 oz." The following week it was Chamberlain's turn to make the biggest find, and he writes: "Yesterday I picked up a piece weighing 4 oz. & 1/2." Their hopes of having at last struck a lead proved, however, ill founded: on June 5th he entered: "Have taken but 53\$, which don't pay our help. This don't look so much like a lead." Up to June 26th they had taken but \$1546, which after they had paid for help and provisions left them but small returns for their hard labor. As the water was drying up fast, they decided to go to San Jose and see what the prospects there were. They found the place flourishing with quite a demand for houses, so concluded to finish up the one they had erected in 1849. They went to San Francisco to get materials, and from there Chaffee concluded to return to Garrote to continue prospecting for the elusive lead "that has fooled us some already."

Chamberlain returned to San Jose, and after doing odd jobs of carpentering for several persons resumed work on the house. As he quaintly puts it, "Commenced work for Chamberlin & Chaffee, a firm that I don't like to work for, as they don't pay well!" In October the house was finished. "It was a very good house," Chamberlain writes, "& cost \$7500.00. When completed a man came along & wanted to purchase. My price was \$6000.00. He offered \$4000, & there was no sale." Some time later the house was sold for \$2100.00.

Early in December Chamberlain went to Gilroy and at the end of the year he was at work there. In January he received word from Chaffee that he had found "something good" and wished him to come to "share with him the pleasure of taking it out;" and soon thereafter the partners were reunited. But it was the old, old story: after paying well for a short time, the pocket was exhausted, and they took barely enough to pay for their grub.

Such to the end was the life history of J. P. Chamberlain. Time and again Fortune, whose favors he richly deserved, seemed within his grasp, and time and again she eluded him. But break his spirit, wring from him an unmanly whimper, or crush out his cheerful optimism, she could not. At the close of 1857 he wrote: "Thus another year has rolled around and we haven't increased our pile, but on the contrary have diminished 800\$ from what we had one year ago. If we are successfull in our present enterprise, we will probably get it back; if not, it has gone the way of all the earth. One thing we have great reason to be thankfull for, that is the good health we have enjoyed the past year."

He used the old book as a scrap-book as well as a journal, and pasted in it are many bits of poetry that he clipped from newspapers. Had he come across Henley's "Out of the Night That Covers Me," he might well have pasted after his last entry the stanza:

*"In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed."*

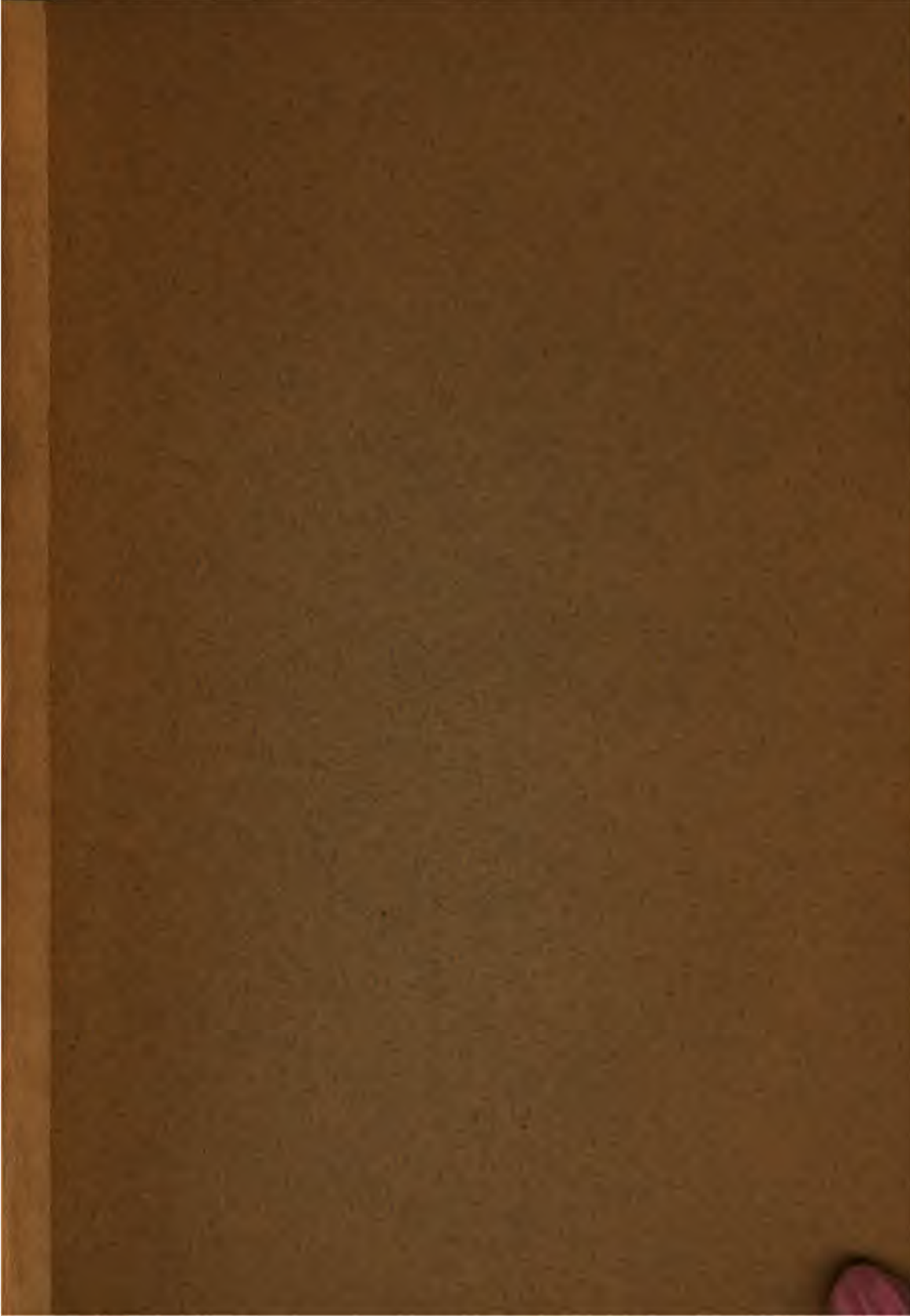
But had he known the poem, it would never have occurred to him to make such a use of it; for, brave, simple soul that he was, he did his day's work without pose, without affectation, and without self-conscious bravado, "burning his own smoke." And, after all, perhaps one reason that I prize his life-record so highly is that I admire so greatly the spirit that it reveals.

Yet in his "Life of Bret Harte," Mr. H. C. Merwin, with full knowledge of Mr. Stocking's article, from which he quotes to show "how closely Bret Harte kept to the facts" in two unimportant details, gives as the "true story" that was the basis of "Tennessee's Partner" that published in 1902 in an anonymous newspaper paragraph, according to which Chaffee's plea was for the life of his partner, Chamberlain, who was accused of stealing the miners' gold! Thus is literary history sometimes written.









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